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DISCUSSION PAPER 11

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THE FEMALE PERPETRATOR OF HOMICIDE IN CANADA

Literature concerning homicides perpetrated by females is found in three types of writing. There is one set of studies that examines female perpetrated homicide on its own or as a part of an empirical discussion of female criminality. These provide simple descriptions of victims, offenders and offenses and offer explanations based on patterns of findings related to such things as relational distance between victims and offenders (see for instance, Block, 1985; Browne and Flewelling, 1986; Palmer and Humphrey, 1982; Rasko, 1981; Silverman and Kennedy, 1987; Straus, 1978, 1980a; Straus et al., 1980; Totman, 1978; Ward, et al. 1969; Weisheit, 1986; Wilbanks, 1982, 1984; Wolfgang, 1958; Zimring et al., 1983). A second variety of study concentrates particularly on the battered woman who strikes out and kills her spouse or spouse surrogate (see for instance, Barnard et al. 1982; Browne 1986, 1987; Fiora-Gormally, 1978;). Much of this literature is either anecdotal, clinical or case study. Some is highly ideological (see for instance, Benedek, 1982; Browne and Palmer, 1975; Chesney-Lind, 1986; Edwards, 1985; Jones, 1980; Star, 1982). A third and relatively new variety of literature explores the varieties of the "battered wife syndrome defense" from a legal standpoint -- its justification and implications for justice (see for examples, Del Tosco, 1980-81; Dvoskin, 1978; Rittenmeyer, 1981; Brodsky, 1987).

Taken as a whole, this research has given us insights into the circumstance of wife battering leading to spousal homicide. However, there is little research directed to homicide perpetrated by women that is not precipitated by a battering experience.

Silverman and Kennedy (1987) report that 41% of the homicides in which the perpetrator was female (in Canada) involved a spouse/lover relationship. Another 36% involved other family members. A further breakdown of the other family relationships (not reported in that study) revealed that 24% of the victims of female killers were their children. These non-

spousal homicides have received little attention in the research literature. Needless to say, this is a significant proportion of the homicides committed by women and deserves a more thorough examination. In this paper we will examine the female perpetrator of homicide with special emphasis on those who kill their children. Given the paucity of literature to guide this research, this paper will be exploratory.

Previous Research

Research that has directly examined female homicide has found varying rates of child killing. Wilbanks (1982) and Weisheit (1986) report 8.5%, Totman (1978) found 13% child killing[1] while Cole, et. al. (1968), Ward et al. (1969) and Rasko (1976) all report that about 20% of the victims of female homicide are their children. The differences have more to do with jurisdiction and sample than any factors that actually affect overall rates of child killing.

Rasko (1976, 1981) found that women in Hungary killed their husbands or lovers 40% of the time and killed children 20% of the time (excluding infanticide). Like writers before her, she groups spouse and child as 'close relationships' and does not concentrate on a differentiation of the two types of victim. Her explanation of the events that precipitate the homicide tends to focus on psychological factors.

Weisheit (1986) examined 39 women incarcerated for killing their children. While Weisheit seems willing to generalize concerning his child killers, the sample of incarcerated women does not justify generalization beyond the particular prison population in Illinois between 1940 and 1966 and 1981-83. Nonetheless, he makes some interesting observations about his sample that may be worth pursuing. He reports a change in the marital status of the offender population over time such that the group studied in the earlier period tended to be married while the group studied in later years tended to be single; child killers tend to kill their children with their hands (beating,

strangulation and suffocation); offenders tended to have a low level of education; be unemployed; and be young (the average age was 26). Further, Weisheit suggests a decline in the killing of newborns. Implied here is the notion that in the earlier period the stigma/shame of having an illegitimate child is being avoided by killing the child. Explanations of findings focus on underregulation and overregulation of social rules with regard to the mothers, but there is no real operational link between the theory and the data.

The most important study of female homicide undertaken thus far was conducted by Totman (1978). The study is important because Totman attempts a more thorough investigation than most other efforts. However, she uses an imprisoned population (in California) and her generalizations to the larger population cannot be justified on the basis of the data source. She selected only females who had murdered a spouse or child who were incarcerated in California's only facility for women during July to Dec. 1969. While there were 129 female killers in the institution, only 50 qualified as spouse (36) or child (14) killers. Hence, about 13% of those females incarcerated for homicide killed their own children. As in other studies, Totman finds that child killers tend to use their hands to kill the child and tend to be younger than spouse killers. [2] In her analysis Totman (1978) presents only raw data but on the basis of her interviews with offenders she does offer insights into the female killer of both spouses and children. It is important to remember, though, that this often cited study examines a small number of cases that are probably not representative of a larger population.

Other than the articles mentioned, it is rare to find any literature on child killing. Instead there is a great deal of literature on child abuse which may, but usually does not, lead to a fatal conclusion for the child (see for instance, Gelles, 1980, 1985; Hyman et al., 1978; Smith et al., 1974; Straus, 1978; Straus and Kantor, 1987; Straus et al., 1980; Wolfgang, 1976). We will return to that literature at the conclusion of the paper.

If the literature on child killing is sparse, then the literature on infanticide (excluding purely clinical treatments) is almost nonexistent. The research that does exist is concerned either with a cultural context (see, for instance, Balikci, 1967) or a historical context (Hoffer and Hull, 1981). The book that is most cited on the topic (Piers, 1978) is anecdotal and uses the case study approach to the subject.

In general, literature of child killing, and for the most part on the female perpetrator of homicide, tends to be either anecdotal, or consist of prison samples from which one should not generalize.

Method and Measurement

The data to be used in this study are generated by Statistics Canada and are the national homicide data for Canada (1961-83). A sub-set including only 10 of the available 23 years is used in the case of infanticide because that category is only reported for 1974 to 1983. Because both infanticide and manslaughter were only reported for 10 of the 23 years, the bulk of this analysis precludes those crimes.[3] Hence, the data represent the population of female perpetrated homicide (excluding manslaughter and infanticide) for a 23 year period and infanticide for a 10 year period.

National data has both advantages and limitations. Given the way in which they are collected and the purposes of the data collection, only secondary analysis can be done. On the other hand, the data do represent every case known to the police and as such represent a population much larger than would be possible to collect by individual researchers.[4] In the case of multiple victims and offenders only the first victim/offender combination (the most intimate grouping) is used for analysis.

The object of the initial investigation is to see if the categories of female homicide differentiate the groups in terms

of offender, victim, or offense characteristics. We are also interested in temporal patterns of female homicide as it relates to all homicides. In attempting to find differentiating characteristics among female offenders based on their relationship with their victims, we categorize events on the basis of victim-offender relationship. The first category used is "spouse" which combines legal and common-law relationships (it omits 'lovers'). The second grouping is mothers who kill their children exclusive of infanticide. Infanticide is a separate data set and involves women charged with that crime. While in the literature there is some discussion and controversy about a definition of infanticide (Piers, 1978; Hoffer and Hull, 1981), the specific definition is critical to an understanding of analysis and findings. In Canada the legal definition is both very narrow and specific:

> A female person commits infanticide when by a wilful act or omission she causes the death of her newly-born child, if at the time of the act or omission she is not fully recovered from the effects of giving birth to the child and by reason thereof or of the effect of lactation consequent on the birth her mind is then disturbed. (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985, section 216)

The final category is a residual category that includes all other female perpetrated homicide (other) -- that is homicide that involves neither a spousal nor a maternal relationship. In the tables, all homicides not accounted for by the categories specified above are included in a column titled 'males' as all remaining homicides are male perpetrated. This category is included to provide a point of comparison for the female perpetrated homicides.

Findings

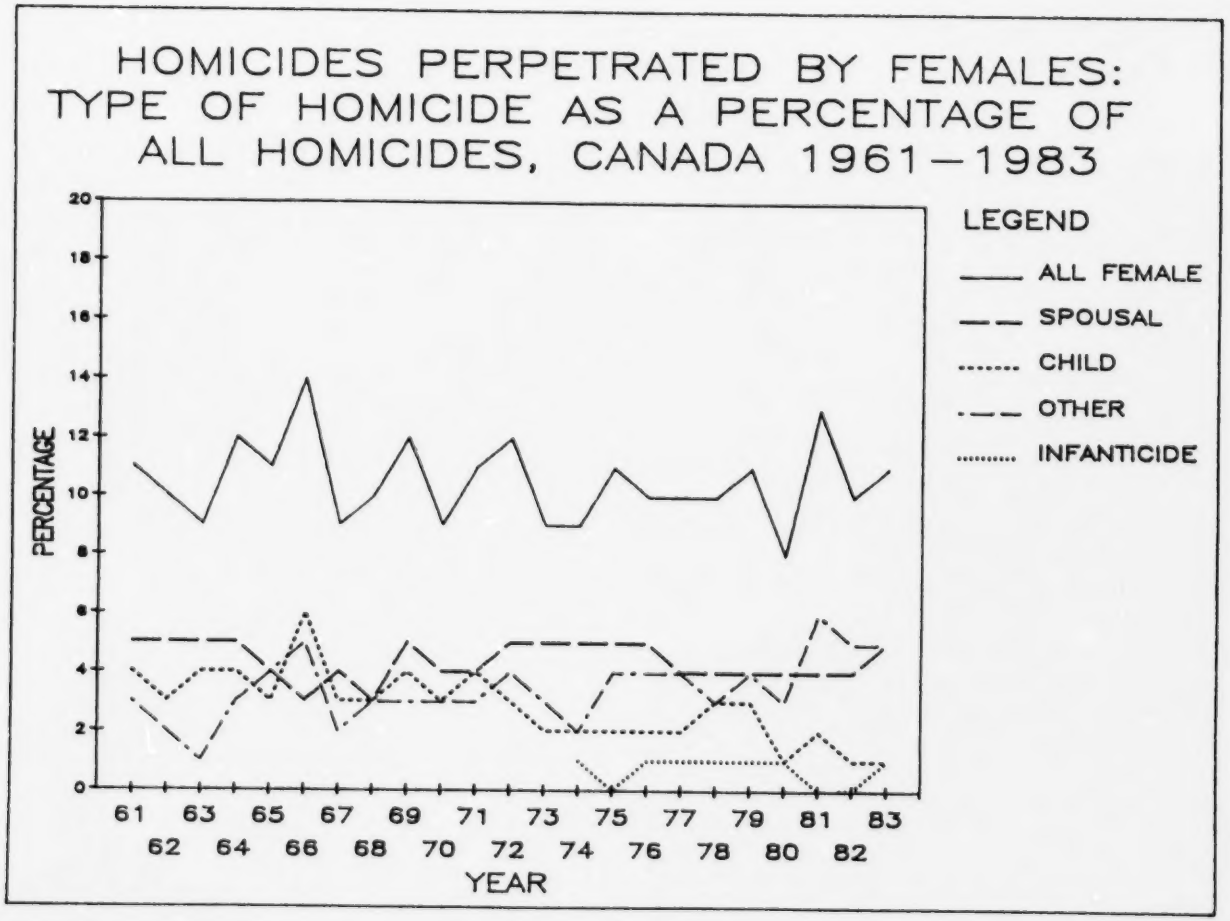
Between 1961 and 1983, 948 females committed homicide (excluding manslaughter and infanticide) in Canada. Seventy-seven percent of their victims were male and 23% were females. One fifth of their victims were under 18 years of age. Forty percent

of the victims were single and 30% were married. Victims were most often caucasian (74%). The next largest category was Canadian Indian at 21%. Most often (42%) an argument precipitated the homicide and stabbing was the most common means (39%) of carrying out the killings. Twenty six percent involved shooting, 14% beating and 21% other means.

One-third of the offenders were 18-25 years of age and 54% were 26 to 45. Sixty-nine percent were caucasian and 28% were Canadian Indian. Forty-four percent were housewives and few of the rest were in other than clerical or domestic occupations.

As indicated above, 22% of females kill their husbands and another 18% kill their common-law husbands. Also, in Canada for the 23 year period under investigation 24% of the homicides perpetrated by females were directed against their children (excluding infanticide). About 7% of all of the homicides perpetrated by females involve either no known relationship or a stranger/crime relationship. The remaining 29% of the homicides involve either friends, acquaintances, or other family members. Hence, in Canada, when a female kills there is almost a 2/3 chance that she will kill her spouse or one of her children and a very small chance that she will kill a stranger or be involved in a crime in addition to the homicide. With specific reference to infanticide, in the 10 year period for which data are available, only 45 cases of infanticide were reported.

As a proportion of all homicide, those killings perpetrated by females has remained relatively stable in Canada over the 23 year period (see Chart 1). When broken down into spousal homicide, homicide by mothers, infanticide, and other female homicide (referred to as 'other') there is still no variation in the patterns. As a proportion of all homicides, females contribute between 10 and 12%. The proportion of 'child' killings has declined slightly while the proportion of 'other' has climbed slightly. Nonetheless, chart 1 indicates little change in any of the sub-categories.


HOMICIDES PERPETRATED BY FEMALES:
TYPE OF HOMICIDE AS A PERCENTAGE OF
ALL HOMICIDES, CANADA 1961–1983
PERCENTAGE
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
14
16
18
20
61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83
YEAR
LEGEND
ALL FEMALE
SPOUSAL
CHILD
OTHER
INFANTICIDE

When all homicide is considered, virtually every research study conducted agrees that females kill males more often than they kill other females (Silverman and Mukherjee, 1986, Silverman and Kennedy, 1987). In the case of the Canadian data, much of this trend is accounted for by the fact that they kill their husbands but an examination of victims who are neither spouses nor children shows that 68% of the other victims are also male (Table 1). It is only when women kill their own children that the sex of victim is much more evenly divided (about 50% male/female for mothers and 57% female in infanticide cases).

In terms of age of victim (Table 2), two categories are more or less pre-set. Age is part of the definition of infanticide and we expect older ages to be prevalent among spouse victims (older meaning post teenage). The more interesting groups are mothers and the 'other' category. For mothers, 31% of the victims are under a year and 73% are under 5. Even in the 'other' female category, 9% of the victims are children (compared to 3% for males). Only about 3% of the mothers kill adult offspring.

An overwhelming proportion of the victims of mothers and infanticide are caucasian (Table 3). Twenty percent of the spousal homicide and 31% of the 'other' category involve Canadian Indian victims.

As might be expected, females committing spousal homicide are somewhat older than those involved in other types of homicide. Mothers, those involved in infanticide and males all include a significant proportion of very young perpetrators. (Table 4). A further breakdown of age (not shown) indicates that in the case of infanticide, 69% of the offenders are under 21 and 30% are under 17. In the case of mothers, 12% are under 21. Like males, but at a somewhat higher level, the 'other' female category also has some young offenders.

Mothers and those involved in infanticide are overwhelmingly caucasian (Table 5). While Canadian Indians are involved in spousal homicide and in the 'other' type of homicide they rarely

TABLE 1
GENDER OF VICTIM *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
Male	100	49.6	43.2	68.4	59.8
Female	--	50.4	56.8	31.6	40.2
N	384	230	44	335	6783
UNK			1		

TABLE 2
AGE OF VICTIM *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
< 6 MO.	--	11.7	84.4	1.5	.4
6 MO - 1	--	20.0	15.6	1.5	.3
1 - 5	--	42.2	--	5.7	2.1
6 - 10	--	15.2	--	2.4	1.7
11 - 15	--	8.9	--	2.7	2.0
16 - 17	--	.9	--	2.1	3.1
18 - 25	8.6	2.2	--	19.5	22.0
26 - 45	59.9	.4	--	31.5	40.0
45 - 64	27.9	.4	--	23.7	20.5
65+	3.6	---	--	10.2	8.0
N	384	230	45	333	6772
UNK	0	0	0	2	11

TABLE 3
RACE OF VICTIM *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
CAUCASIAN	73.7	89.1	91.7	64.4	79.2
BLACK	1.6	.5	5.6	1.6	1.6
MONGOLOID	.5	.9	---	1.3	.7
CDN-INDIAN	20.9	8.1	---	31.2	16.2
ESKIMO	.8	.5	2.8	--	.5
METIS	2.4	.9	---	1.6	1.8
N	369	221	35	317	64.1
UNK	15	9	10	18	352

* HOMICIDE PERPETRATED BY FEMALES: CANADA 1961 TO 1983; INFANTICIDE 1974-1983

are charged with killing their children and have never been charged with infanticide. Other racial groups do not contribute much to the female homicide rates but the low involvement of Eskimo's in infanticide is noteworthy given cultural mores concerning infanticide (Balikci, 1967).

The most noteworthy feature of Table 6 is the fact that almost 70% of those involved in infanticide are single, while mothers tend to be married (70% married or common-law).

Motive presents a somewhat confusing picture. These data are generated by a policeman's opinion and the probability of reporting reliability is rather low. But one finding makes motive worth examining. Females involved in spouse homicide, 'other' females and male perpetrators are most often classified as having been involved in arguments or angering situations before the crime (Table 7). Obviously, mothers (of small children) and those involved in infanticide should not be involved in arguments -- at least not with the victim and the data tend to confirm this. On the other hand, 67% of the mothers and 36% of those involved in infanticide are classified as 'mentally ill' in terms of motive. This finding replicates earlier U.S findings (Wilbanks, 1982).

The means by which the female offender dispatches her victim varies by the relationship. For spouse and 'other' perpetrators victims are most often stabbed. Shooting is the second most common means utilized by this group. In the case of spouse killings those two means account for 90% of the crimes, while in the case of 'other' female homicides 65% are accounted for by shooting and stabbing and another 18% by beating (Table 8). Mothers most often beat their offspring to death (22%) but suffocation (16%), drowning (15%), and strangulation (13%) are also common means. In the case of infanticide, suffocation (27%), followed by beating (12%) and strangulation (12%) are most common.

Finally, it is revealing to note that while it is sometimes assumed that women commit suicide following homicide as often as or more often than men, these data suggest that it is only

TABLE 4
AGE OF SUSPECT *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
<14	--	--	2.6	2.1	.6
14-17	.3	3.5	33.3	14.7	7.5
18-25	17.0	32.0	56.6	35.2	32.7
26-45	62.6	59.2	7.7	40.9	45.0
46-64	19.4	4.8	---	7.2	11.6
65+	.8	.4	---	---	2.6
N	382	228	39	325	6765
UNK	2	2	6	10	18

TABLE 5
RACE OF SUSPECT *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
CAUCASIAN	68.6	90.4	91.7	54.9	78.6
BLACK	1.4	.5	5.6	1.6	2.1
MONGOLOID	---	.9	---	.6	2.1
CDN-INDIAN	26.8	7.3	---	38.6	15.9
ESKIMO	.8	.5	2.8	.3	.6
METIS	2.4	.5	---	4.1	2.3
N	369	219	36	319	6519
UNK	15	11	9	16	264

TABLE 6
MARITAL STATUS OF SUSPECT *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
SINGLE	---	10.6	69.3	53.2	47.5
MARRIED	50.3	67.0	17.9	16.9	27.6
SEPARATED	3.8	6.2	2.6	9.8	7.7
WIDOWED	.3	2.2	--	1.8	1.1
DIVORCED	.8	2.6	--	5.5	2.7
COMMON-LAW	20.1	3.9	10.3	7.4	5.9
OTHER[1]	24.7	7.5	--	5.2	7.5
N	369	219	39	325	6622
UNK	15	11	6	10	161

[1] The "other" category is a residual category which indicates a historical rather than current marital status. For instance, in the case of the spouse category the "other" grouping refers to prior "common-law" statuses coupled with current status.

* HOMICIDE PERPETRATED BY FEMALES: CANADA 1961 TO 1983; INFANTICIDE 1974-1983

mothers who commit suicide following homicide. They do so at a rather startling rate of almost 19% (Table 9). If, as it is assumed, suicide following homicide is a sign of remorse, then with the exception of 'mothers', women, for the most part do not seem to feel then kind of remorse that leads to suicide. Perhaps this supports the notion that, particularly following the killing of an abusing spouse, the feeling is one of relief rather than remorse.

It might be assumed that some of our findings are artificially created in the sense that infanticide is really a legal category and mothers who kill young children are very much like mothers who commit infanticide. To our surprise, this was not the case. An analysis of mothers who kill children under one year of age indicates that the differences between 'mothers' and 'infanticide' hold even when only those mothers who kill children under 1 are examined. This may mean that the legal category is being rigorously adhered to but more likely is an indication of a reduced charge resulting from the circumstances of the case. A recent example of a 16 year old who hid her pregnancy serves to illustrate the point. She had the child alone, was afraid of the consequences of discovery and strangled or suffocated the infant (she was too psychologically confused to remember what she did). The body was left in a garbage bag in a truck full of garbage. Her charge was reduced from first degree murder (carrying a mandatory 25 year non-parolable sentence) to infanticide (for which she received two years probation). (Edmonton Journal, 1987).

Discussion

Like other types of female crime, female perpetrated homicide is not a monolithic act that can be explained by one framework. There are many types of homicide (Nettler, 1982) and an attempt to find a single theoretical framework to explain the behaviors involved would probably not be fruitful. Differentiation of perpetrators on the basis of their relationship with their victims is a first step toward a better

TABLE 7
MOTIVE *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
ANGER	21.0	18.7	9.7	31.9	32.4
ARGUMENT	62.9	2.0	3.2	41.9	35.8
CRIME	.5	---	---	7.7	15.3
OTHER	9.5	12.1	51.7	9.0	9.2
MENTAL ILL.	6.0	67.2	35.5	9.4	7.2
N	367	198	31	310	6167
UNK	17	32	14	25	616

TABLE 8
MEANS OF OFFENSE COMMISSION *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
SHOOTING	40.4	9.4	---	20.6	41.3
BEATING	5.5	22.4	12.5	18.2	23.7
STABBING	50.3	9.4	5.0	44.8	21.4
STRANGLE	1.3	12.9	12.5	6.3	7.0
SUFFOCATE	.5	16.1	27.5	3.6	1.6
DROWN	--	14.7	10.8	1.2	.9
ARSON	.8	2.2	--	.6	.9
OTHER	1.3	12.5	32.5	31.7	3.2
N	384	224	40	335	6759
UNK	--	6	5	0	24

TABLE 9
PERCENTAGE SUICIDE FOLLOWING HOMICIDE *

Category	Spouse	Mother	Infanticide	Other	Males
PERCENT SUICIDE	3.4	18.7	0.0	.9	10.1
N	384	230	40	335	6783
UNK	0	0	5	0	0

* HOMICIDE PERPETRATED BY FEMALES: CANADA 1961 TO 1983; INFANTICIDE 1974-1983

understanding of killings by women.

Two thirds of the homicides perpetrated by women are accounted for by killings of their husbands and children. Much of the rest of the female perpetrated homicide involves other family members and friends and acquaintances. Hence, in Canada over a 23 year period we confirm earlier findings that when females kill, they are most likely to kill a family member or other intimate. Nonetheless, it should be recalled that in spite of who they kill, females still contribute only about 10 or 12% to the overall homicide rate and that small proportion has remained relatively constant over time.

Our effort in this paper has concentrated on a comparison of mothers who kill their children with other types of female perpetrated homicide. We find that differentiation occurs between these perpetrators and others and between those committing infanticide and 'mothers'.

There is, of course, a troublesome aspect to these data. Homicides of mothers killing their children are probably under reported. The reasons for under reporting are self-evident. Claims of SIDS or accident (when, in fact, intentional suffocation or beating are the true cause of death) make a true count of these homicides unlikely (Gelles, 1980). The data do represent the population of arrested mothers and it is difficult even to estimate the extent of under reporting. On the basis of what is available, it is observed that these represent a very small proportion of all homicide but a substantial proportion of homicides perpetrated by women.

Some of these findings are consistent with earlier studies done with more limited samples in other jurisdictions. For instance, the finding that women are more often categorized as having mental disturbance is confirmed here. Interestingly, when they kill their spouse, only 6% are declared as having mental illness. When they kill other acquaintances or family, 9% are supposedly mentally ill. But when they violate the maternal role

and kill their children they are declared mentally ill 67% of the time, (36% for those committing infanticide). While other researchers report similar findings, (Wilbanks, 1982) there is little evidence to support a 'mentally ill' hypothesis. In fact, Straus (1980), whose family violence data is probably the best currently available, indicates that his research leads him to believe that only about 10% of intra-family violence can be accounted for by psychological factors. Perhaps when mothers kill their children this proportion rises but it is difficult to believe that it rises to the level indicated by police reports. Instead, it is more likely that killing children is seen as inconsistent with gender stereotype (Wilbanks, 1982). It is likely that the tautology: "if they killed their kids they must be crazy" is most likely driving police to check off that category on their code sheets.

Spouse killers tend to be a bit older than male perpetrators and 'other' female killers are about the same age as males. However, mothers and especially those committing infanticide are a good deal younger than those in other homicide categories. Females become killers at a somewhat older age than males (Wilbanks, 1982) except for mothers and those committing infanticide. Mothers are younger than other female killers and those committing infanticide are barely more than children themselves.

Like many earlier studies we find that unlike men who choose to shoot their victims, women who kill their spouse or 'others' tend to stab their victims. It should be pointed out, though, that women who kill their spouse use a gun 40% of the time (a proportion almost identical to male use of guns). As has been pointed out in earlier research, mothers and those committing infanticide use their hands to kill their offspring (Weisheit, 1986; Totman, 1978). It is significant that mothers tend to beat their children while those committing infanticide suffocate or strangle their offspring 40% of the time. They also use 'other' techniques 32% of the time. The finding that mothers beat their children offers some indication that their child

killing is an extension of child abuse.

A few features which differentiate mothers from those committing infanticide stand out. First, both groups are younger than other female perpetrators of homicide and those committing infanticide are the youngest group. Second, none of those committing infanticide follow their act with suicide while 19% of mothers do. Third, mothers beat their victims to death while those committing infanticide use other means. Fourth, most of the mothers are married while most of those committing infanticide are single.

It is reasonably clear that these two groups require different explanations. In seeking an explanatory framework for the events described two useful sources of literature emerge. First, we return to the family violence and child abuse literature and, second, to a more psychological orientation in the case of young mothers who kill their newborns.

The evidence suggests that mothers who kill their children may not have meant to kill them at all -- as was indicated in Totman's interviews (1978). The act was essentially child abuse gone awry. The mother beats, suffocates, or strangles her child in an angry rage. Feeling great remorse for the action, the mother sometimes kills herself following the killing.[5] The mothers are young, many stuck in the household with no interactions except with the infant.[6] Totman (1978) characterizes them as lonely (see also Smith et al., 1974), with few options. If indeed, most of the killing of children by mothers is child abuse in the extreme then the explanation for those is linked to child abuse. Straus characterizes the family as the place in which violence is first learned (1987, also Straus et al., 1980, Wolfgang, 1976). In the case of children, violence directed against them (including 'normal' physical punishment) as well as violence directed toward other members of the family is likely to mold their orientation toward violence. Hence, the child from a violent home will likely be violent in his own home upon reaching adulthood. Straus also claims that

violence in one sphere of life is related to violence in other spheres (1978). Dealing specifically with spouse abuse he suggests that the marriage licence is a 'hitting licence' (see also Dutton, 1980). His conclusions may be taken one step further to suggest an explanation for mothers who beat their children to death. The ability to have (or get) children is also a hitting licence. Mothers may hit their children simply because they cannot control their anger and frustration. They may hit, as well, because they cannot cope with children or because violence is directed against them. Straus points out (1980) that the more a wife is assaulted, the more likely she will incorporate violence into her own behavior. If uncontained violence is directed against females, they may eventually strike out against their spouse or they may turn their frustration, anger and hurt on their children (see for example Dutton, 1980). In a sense, they may transfer their feelings to a convenient and perhaps annoying target. The question concerning violence against children can be resolved by two somewhat different hypotheses. First, mothers who physically abuse their children occasionally do so to the point of killing them. Explanation for the beating is found in the violent family situation. Second, some mothers who beat their children to the point of death are transferring anger away from the actual source of their frustration and using the child as an available target. In either case, the source of difficulty is in family interaction. It is probably worth pursuing both of these hypotheses in future work as solutions to the problem and any attempts to reduce the rate of child killing will be dependent of which scenario obtains.

Infanticide requires a different explanation as the population of offenders exhibits distinct characteristics. As suggested above, offenders may be selected for this category by the courts because of the social characteristics of the case and of the offenders. From a legal point of view the important aspect is intention or mens rea. The factor that differentiates these mothers from the other group is (legally defined) intention to kill the child. Infanticide suggests that there is a mental condition that mediates the event. In fact, it seems that the

social-psychological factor that mediates the event is immaturity. As our data indicate, these offenders are very young and unmarried. They do not commit suicide and they use a variety of means to kill their offspring. They probably see no options except to kill the child -- to avoid discovery, to avoid shame and stigma for themselves and their family. They seem in no way equipped to mother a child. An interesting finding in this regard is the fact that the most common occupation of those committing infanticide is student. The pregnancies were most likely unwanted and at least some were probably not even 'noticed' (Edmonton Journal, 1987). Several researchers point out that a high proportion of out-of-wedlock pregnancies are unwanted (Smith et al., 1974).

Our initial findings in this paper lead to a conclusion that an interest in the female perpetrator of homicides requires a knowledge of the victim-offender relationship and a more thorough knowledge of victim-offender interaction than can be provided by national aggregate data. In any case, it is clear that female perpetrators of homicide should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Differentiation on the basis of victim-offender relationship has proven to be a useful avenue for exploration of the topic.

NOTES

1. Even though Weisheit (1986) reports her this as 28%. In fact Totman (1978) found 28% of her sample as being child killers but her sample does not represent all female killers in the institution where she selected only those who had killed a mate or child.

2. Her findings concerning race are less relevant to our Canadian study in which race does not play much of a factor.

3. It should be pointed out that there are a total of only 79 manslaughter and 45 infanticide perpetrated by women. While the infanticide are examined as a special case, the manslaughters are not included in the analysis.

4.See R. Silverman and L. Kennedy, "Relational Distance and Homicide: The Role of the Stranger", Journal of Criminology and Criminal Law, Aug. 1987, Forthcoming, for details concerning the sample and measurement.

5. Explanations involving mothers who kill adult children are probably found in the same sources as explanations for killings among other family relationships.

6. Eighty two percent of the mothers classify their occupation as housewife.

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